

# The art of the confrontation

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## • Before confrontation

- AVOID THE AMBUSH! (Thanks for coming to the panel!)
- OK IF THAT DOESN'T WORK -- PREPARE, PREPARE, PREPARE
  - Research and understand your subject. What do they look like? What about them would make the interview confrontational? Is it the nature of the story, the personality of the source or other factors?
  - If you're prepared, there's less of a chance a source's answers throw you off. Your anger or defensiveness won't help the story.
- RESEARCH LOGISTICS
  - If possible, scout your location. A workplace is preferable, especially if you're reporting on a public official. Early bird gets the worm.
- PRACTICE FOR A LONG INTERVIEW, BUT BE READY FOR A SHORT ONE
  - Know the core tidbit of information you need. Is it a reaction, or the motivation behind the source's actions? You don't need to write down questions ahead of time, but at the very least know the themes you need to hit.
  - Role play! You'll become more comfortable with your questions, how to phrase them and the overall flow.
- CONTEMPLATE THE TIMING (i.e. PREWRITE!)
  - If possible, plan an in-person interview as early as is practicable in the reporting process. The subject matter may dictate when you do the approach.
  - If there's a chance the person could take their version of the story to a competitor after you ask for an interview, having most of your story written before the interview is crucial.

### **PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANT PART: FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, TURN ON THE MIC**

All cameras and recorders need to be ON before the first question. Consider using lav AND stick.

## • During confrontation

- BE (PAINFULLY) POLITE
  - Professionalism is paramount. Viewers/readers can turn against us. Like it or not, optics matter.
  - Minimize harm. Avoid children and "innocents." Ethics above all else.
- KNOW WHEN TO QUIT
  - Barring extenuating circumstances, if someone says "stop following me," "leave me alone," "no comment," wind down and step aside. We are not in the business of harassment.
  - But if silence is the answer, keep going as long as you're comfortable.
- STICK TO THE STORY
  - The source may try to attack you or push attention away from your findings.
  - Be open to their answers, but keep the focus of an interview on your main findings. Stay the course!
- FOR THAT REASON, ASK YOUR BEST QUESTION FIRST
  - You may only get one shot. Make sure it's an open-ended question. Avoid 'yes' or 'no' questions.
  - Don't overthink it. **Ask the question a human would ask. The simplest question is often the best.**
- ARE YOU IN A GAGGLE?
  - Get up front. You're useless in the back where no one can hear you.
  - **DO NOT ASK QUESTIONS THAT ARE ALREADY PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE (What time are you in court? Who is your lawyer? What's the bill number?)**
  - Be gracious. Ask the questions you need, then let others get a turn. (Karma)

## • After confrontation

- DID THE SOURCE MAKE NEWS?
  - If you were in a gaggle or around others, think of how you can use that information in a way that doesn't undercut your investigation.
  - If you can't, consider waiting to publish (GASP) until you're ready. It's ok to take time to produce the better, more complete story you'd planned rather than rushing and risking inaccuracies or a lawsuit.
- REFLECT
  - Despite our best efforts, confrontational interviews can get heated. It's important to review what happened to understand how to be better next time around.
  - If there's a chance you need to interact with the person again make sure you send a note or some acknowledgement thanking the person for their time. Kill them with kindness.

## MORE TIPS FROM EXCEEDINGLY TALENTED REPORTERS NOT PARTICIPATING IN THE PANEL

(Eric Eyre, *Charleston Gazette-Mail*; David Gutman, *The Seattle Times*; Miles Moffeit, *Dallas Morning News*; Anita Wadhvani, *Tennessean*)

### When should I approach the confrontational source?

- **EE:** “Toward the end, but not too close to the end so that you have time to adjust. At least a couple of days for a short-term investigation or two to three weeks for a longer investigation. Might need to shorten that window if the ‘bad actor’ has a history of trying to derail you by getting out in front of the story via press conference or release.”
- **DG:** “If you’ve got little history with the actor you’ve probably gotta remain open to them having a convincing explanation for whatever it is you’re alleging, right? In that case, you’d give them plenty of time to respond. If, on the other hand, this is a person/agency/company/whatever that you cover regularly and they’re rarely responsive or helpful, there’s no sense in tipping them off too soon about what you know. They could leak a more flattering version to a competitor or try to get others not to talk to you or similarly nefarious things to spoil your story.”
- **MM:** “In the most serious investigations, say involving a potentially sensitive target or dangerous person, you’ll likely wait until most of your reporting - sometimes most of the writing, even - is significantly done. You don’t want to jeopardize sources. The calculation is: how much can you safely learn early on vs later.”
- **AW:** “Often, I think there’s a perception that reporters showing up at doorsteps of public officials is unfair...But the reason we do this is to be fair – to give people every chance to respond to a potentially negative story about them...Earlier in my career, I would wait until close to publication to pose hard questions. I think I was worried that I didn’t have all my ducks in a row and wasn’t prepared to ask those hard questions, with reporting to back me up. But you want the subject of investigative reporting to be on the ball, to come prepared with their responses, to be able to challenge your reporting before the story runs.”

### What tactics or skills have you used or learned that led to potentially confrontational sources opening up?

- **EE:** “If you know the confrontational source is not going to answer your questions, you might ask a fellow reporter to ask your questions when the public official is holding a press conference about another matter.”
- **DG:** “In my experience, the phone call/confrontation is rarely as bad or uncomfortable as I was expecting. That is, it’s almost always easier than anticipated. Be open, be honest about what you know and what you’re planning on writing. If they won’t talk, they won’t talk.”
- **MM:** “Relentless politeness. Scrap the ego and maintain Zen at all times. You want to engage everyone for as long as possible, keep them on the phone. There’s never a scenario where it pays to lose your cool...Project open mindedness. Be empathetic. Be authentically interested in your villain and strike an understanding tone no matter how despicable the person seems.”
- **AW:** “I think it comes down to basic reporting skills: sincerely asking to hear someone’s side of the story. Letting them know you are open to whatever response they have. Then persisting if they have no response. I think politeness and courtesy go a very long way.”

### When, if ever, does the confrontation become a part of the story?

- **EE:** “I try not to make it part of the story, but realize that’s very effective for TV.”
- **DG:** “It’s probably better generally if it’s not part of the story. But if they’re really doing something nefarious, and then get unreasonably confrontational when you ask about it, that’s probably good supporting evidence and worth including.”
- **MM:** “Confrontation will almost always be a part of the story...The moments when powerful questions spoken calmly disarm the angry charlatans of course make for compelling passages.”
- **AW:** “I think the quotes are what matters most. If they’re spitting in your face with anger when they talk to you, I don’t think that necessarily belongs in the story. I want to give them a voice in the story but I don’t think how difficult or challenging for me as a reporter in getting those quotes should be part of the story...If the person evaded me repeatedly then ran away the moment I got to his/her office then I would mention that to show my efforts to be fair. I guess ultimately the confrontation – and it’s usually not a single conversation in an ongoing and in-depth story – is important only if it sheds further light on the story you are investigating.”